
Iowa Legislative Fiscal Bureau

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Loess Hills and the National Park System

ISSUE

This *Issue Review* addresses the issue of preserving natural areas located in the Loess Hills and the process for adding the region to the National Park System. This overview will identify the qualifications by the National Park Service and other alternatives for the area.

AFFECTED AGENCIES

Department of Natural Resources
Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship

CODE AUTHORITY

Chapter 161D.1, Code of Iowa

BACKGROUND

Loess Hills

The Loess Hills are located on the western edge of the State and were formed thousands of years ago when particles of loess accumulated to form the bluffs of the region. Loess is wind-blown deposits composed of silt particles that erode easily. The soil structure of the Loess Hills is unique and supports rare plant and animal habitat such as the Loess Hills fern, the locoweed, the plains pocket mouse, and the prairie rattlesnake. Counties in the Loess Hills include Plymouth, Woodbury, Monona, Harrison, Pottawattamie, Mills, and Fremont.

In 1986, the National Park Service designated approximately 10,000 acres of the Loess Hills region as a National Natural Landmark. One site includes 7,000 acres in central Monona County and the other site includes 3,000 acres in northern Harrison County. This designation does not provide federal funding to the area.

The Department of Natural Resources has acquired land for the Loess Hills Wildlife Area, three State Parks, a number of State Preserves, and more recently established the Loess Hills Pioneer State Forest. The forest consists of 9,100 acres in Harrison and Monona Counties and a total of 18,000 acres are proposed for public ownership.

National Park System

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Additions to the National Park System are created by an act of Congress or a Presidential Proclamation. In most cases, the first step taken by the National Park Service is the completion of a special resource study of the area, which includes three evaluations:

- Is the area of national significance and does it possess unique natural, cultural, or recreational characteristics?
- Is the area a suitable and feasible addition for the National Park System? An area is suitable if the characteristics of the area are not currently represented in the National Park System. Feasibility determines if the area is large enough to provide long-range protection and management by the National Park Service at a reasonable expense.
- Does the area require National Park Service management or can it be managed by another agency or by the private sector?

Upon completion of the study, the National Park Service recommends the area as an addition or suggests alternative actions for state, local, and private groups to preserve the area.

CURRENT SITUATION

Loess Hills Programs

The following are current Loess Hills Programs:

- The Loess Hills Development and Conservation Authority was created in 1993, to develop plans for projects related to the natural resources and infrastructure problems of counties in western Iowa. The Authority has one project, the Hungry Canyons of Western Iowa Project, that addresses damage caused by stream bank erosion. The 1998 General Assembly appropriated \$1.2 million from the Rebuild Iowa Infrastructure Fund to the Loess Hills Development and Conservation Fund for the Hungry Canyons Project.
- Two local groups, the Golden Hills Resource Conservation and Development and the Western Iowa Tourism Region, coordinated the creation of the Loess Hills Scenic Byway. The Byway designates a driving course and scenic stops for tourists visiting the Loess Hills. In addition to the Scenic Byway, the groups have completed the Loess Hills Scenic Byway Corridor Management Plan. The Plan addresses the resources of the Loess Hills and makes recommendations for improvements to public facilities, land use strategies, and other ongoing management activities.
- The Blufflands Protection Revolving Fund was created by the 1998 General Assembly to loan money to private conservation organizations wanting to purchase blufflands adjacent to State-owned land along the Mississippi River and the Missouri River. The appropriation of \$500,000 from the Rebuild Iowa Infrastructure Fund is split equally between eastern and western Iowa.
- A Loess Hills Public Forum was held on September 25, 1998, at the Hitchcock Nature Area near Crescent, Iowa. One of the outcomes of the forum was a discussion on the formation of a Loess Hills Alliance. The Alliance would consist of members from the seven counties in the Loess Hills and would become the second project under the jurisdiction of the Loess Hills Development and Conservation Authority.

National Park System Models

The following is a brief overview of some of the National Park System designations:

- National Park—large natural places having a wide variety of attributes. Hunting, trapping, and mining are not allowed.

- National Monument—landmarks, structures, and other objects of historic or scientific interest located on land owned or controlled by the federal government.
- National Preserve—similar to National Parks, but hunting, trapping, and oil or gas extraction is allowed.
- National Reserve—an area where the National Park Service provides technical assistance but the majority of the land is privately owned.
- National Recreation Area—usually located on large reservoirs and emphasizes water-based recreation.
- National Parkway—refers to a roadway and parkland parallel to the roadway. Parkways are intended for scenic motoring along a protected corridor.

The following are examples of National Park System models:

- Minnesota—The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area is a 72-mile corridor that runs through the Minneapolis and St. Paul metropolitan area. Congress added this recreation spot to the National Park System in 1988 to represent the national significance of the Mississippi River. The National Park Service owns only 43 of the 54,000 acres within the Recreation Area. Management of the Area is a cooperative effort between the National Park Service, 30 local governments, and other private organizations.
- Kansas—Congress created the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve located in the Flint Hills of Kansas in November 1996. The Preserve consists of 11,000 acres with the majority of them owned by the National Park Trust. The National Park Service owns 180 acres. The Preserve is managed in a cooperative effort between the National Park Trust and the National Park Service.
- California—The Mojave National Preserve was created in October 1994, when Congress passed the California Desert Protection Act. This legislation created the Preserve, which consists of 1.6 million acres. Currently, the Preserve is managed by the National Park Service.
- Louisiana—The Cane River Creole National Historic Park and Heritage Area was created by Congress in November 1994. The national park is located within the Cane River National Heritage Area. The entire region's management plan is being developed by the Cane River National Heritage Area Commission. The Commission consists of members from the National Park Service and from the community.

ALTERNATIVES

The following options are tools for the preservation of the Loess Hills:

- An act by Congress requiring the National Park Service to conduct a special resource study of the Loess Hills area and funding for the study would be the first step for an evaluation of a National Park System designation. Residents and other interested citizens would contact members of Congress to begin this process.
- An act by Congress to create an addition to the National Wildlife Refuge System similar to the Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge located in Jasper County. The Refuge is managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.
- The Iowa Legislature could pass legislation requesting Congress to establish a National Park in the Loess Hills. Other legislation could increase funding to purchase land in the Loess Hills by the Department of Natural Resources or for loans to conservation groups using the Blufflands Revolving Protection Fund. The Iowa Legislature could pass legislation designating the Loess Hills region as a state Conservation Priority Area within the Conservation Reserve Program. A fourth type of legislation would include income tax incentives, such as tax credits for conservation easements.

- The establishment of the Loess Hills Alliance would provide a centralized group to address the issues of the area. The Alliance would provide a comprehensive plan for the development of the Loess Hills area and would designate priority scenic areas, educate the public on ways to preserve the natural resources of the land, and promote tourism and related industries to the Loess Hills.
- Counties, cities, and landowners could develop a comprehensive plan that would encourage planned growth for the area while maintaining the natural resources of the Loess Hills.

BUDGET IMPACT

To evaluate the Loess Hills as an addition to the National Park System, federal funds would be needed to conduct the special resource study.

Federal or State funds would be needed to acquire additional land in the area. An additional appropriation to the Blufflands Revolving Protection Fund would enable conservation groups to purchase land or conservation easements in the Loess Hills. It is estimated this would cost \$2.5 million.

The establishment of Loess Hills Alliance as a second program under the jurisdiction of the Loess Hills Development and Conservation Authority would require State funding for start up costs and to hire an individual to coordinate the Alliance. It is estimated this would cost \$55,000.

AVAILABLE INFORMATION

Additional information relating to the Loess Hills and the National Park System is available from the Legislative Fiscal Bureau.

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